
One View of the Etiology of Depression in the American Indian

SEVERAL YEARS AGO Bergman (1) described a national meeting of mental health professionals and tribal leaders. One of the tribal leaders asked a young psychiatrist to describe the nature of the mental problem among American Indians. The psychiatrist attempted to go into an in-depth analysis of how he saw the problem, and he soon became entangled in his own rhetoric. There followed a silence as he tried to collect his thoughts. After a length of time in which everybody was becoming quite uncomfortable, the then and still present chairman of the Miccosukee tribe of Florida, Mr. Buffalo Tiger, stood up and said, "Let me explain it this way." "Today," he said, "Indians are like a man who got up early in the morning and looked out his door and saw something shining in the road a little way away. It was something he wanted and he walked over and picked it up and when he was done picking it up he saw something further along that he also wanted. He went and got that and it happened again and he kept walking down the road picking up things. Then,

all of a sudden, he turned around and he couldn't find his way back home again."

A state of unhappiness exists when things go wrong. We then experience a feeling of sadness or discontentment, but do not suffer a loss of perspective. Being depressed, on the other hand, is a gloomy mood which permeates a person's basic emotional disposition and largely determines how he perceives himself, his environment, and perhaps most importantly, the future. It is the perception of the future that particularly applies to the Indian and often takes the form of an unyielding conviction that all is totally hopeless—a dismal outlook that defies undoing. Reality for him becomes arrested in the present and contains little in the way of a future component. Fantasy becomes restricted and is experienced and expressed as gloomy ruminations over a narrowed spectrum of thoughts. Stimuli are misperceived and short circuited, leading to an affect rather than flowing through the normal processes of perceived stimulus → step-wise logical thought → judgment → decision → response (behavior or action).

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Causal Factors

Is there an identifiable factor that plays a significant role in the causality of depression in American Indians? It is our view that there exists a Federal-American Indian relationship that is singularly iatrogenic in this respect. Stated briefly, this relationship has

created in countless numbers of people a parasitic dependency that has become so entrenched as a way of life for the Indian that he is rewarded by being a receiver of Government services as long as he remains passively dependent. For the most part, this relationship either destroys thought and initiative, or worse, provides no reason for their development.

Thus many federally dependent Indians, unable to exercise control over their own destinies, may not fully develop a concept of a total life plan, are not goal attainment oriented, and like children, may have difficulty sustaining drives or postponing gratification. Also, in many respects, this relationship of Federal dependency creates an adult-child whose emotional and social maturation processes are arrested. The Indian, lacking the opportunity to make decisions that count, develops a lifelong negative evaluation of self.

In terms of this adult-child relationship, Hollowell (2) discussed three levels of acculturation among the Ojibwa. Within the transitional and traditional, he observed a regression in personality. Rorschach responses were similar to those of children. He concluded that "these regressive trends in their personality structure makes an optimum of mental health impossible under the conditions that confront them." In the most acculturated group he found that these people exhibited a weakening of rigid control characteristic of the traditional Ojibwa personality but

without acquisition of any new compensation factors. "There has thus emerged an apathetic type of personality with a great paucity of inner resources."

In reference to forced cultural change, Voget (3) indicates that some societies resort to nativistic movements, going back to the blanket, while others do the opposite, passive resistance or apathy to the dominant culture. He states: ". . . the disorganizing and restraining effects of a pervasive anxiety so predominates that at best a passive or adjustive nativism emerges. In such instances, compulsive hostility and anxiety seem to immobilize individuals, setting them adrift between two cultural worlds."

Economic Factors

Most reservation Indians are faced with inordinately chronic high unemployment rates. In some areas this rate is greater than one-half of the work-pool population. In a comprehensive study of scholastic failure among Indian students, Bryde (4) in his introduction states: "Among the many sources of cultural values, economic factors rank high in determining the patterns of belief and response which characterize a society. The manner in which its members make a living from natural resources is thus of prime significance in understanding social motivation. Therefore, as long as the ecology of a culture remains intact, behavior indigenous to that ecology

is normal to the culture." He goes on to state, "What is of interest, though, is that when the economic basis of a culture is destroyed and its natural ecology disrupted, the values that originally arose from that economy tend to remain active and alive but relatively inoperable in the changed culture. This is the current history of the great Sioux culture. When their manner of making a living hunting the buffalo was taken away, their natural economic basis was removed, their ecology disrupted and an alien conquering culture tried to force a new economy upon them, one to which their traditional values have no relation." Low education levels, plus unemployment, added to this dependency existence and the resultant lowered self-esteem are ready explanations when one considers depression. Clearly, these factors are also intricately implicated in alcohol dependency, suicide, homicide, accidents, and other acts of social dysfunction. It is understandable that if one feels bad about oneself and if there is a substance that quickly, although temporarily, lessens the intensity of these dependent feelings, a person would wish to continually reexperience the effect of that substance. In this context, alcohol use may be seen as a self-prescribed medication to combat depression and attenuate feelings of poor worth.

An Indian child reared in this setting is disadvantaged from the moment of his birth. His initial socialization includes not only that which is good from traditional Indian culture, but gradually incorporates an awareness of a lifelong dependency state. As maturation proceeds, and his experiences expose him more and more to the dependent nature of his existence, he becomes increasingly aware that he is more or less a ward of the Federal Government. He learns that the land he resides upon was allocated to his people on a unilateral nonoptional "exchange" system whereby vast areas were removed from his people's control and replaced by other less desirable tracts of land. These new homesites were often remotely located and deemed less than suitable as living sites. Erstwhile sacred grounds, burial sites, and hallowed places of worship and ceremonies become replaced with commercial and recreational facilities. Many glaring examples are documented. The mound sites of the ancient Hopewell Indian tribe are today the Newark, Ohio, Municipal Golf Course. The Sacred Blue Lake of the Taos people was recently a motor boat, water-ski, and fishing resort area. Only after years of struggle and litigation was rightful restoration accomplished. To better understand the painful intensity of these feelings of Indian people, imagine the Vatican being used for a rock concert.

This parent-child relationship permeates all levels of the Federal Government where the Native American is concerned. In the area of Indian education, for example, the Bureau of Indian Affairs is responsible for the education of thousands of American Indian children. On the Navajo reservation approximately 25,000 children are attending boarding schools. Goldstein (5) described one such institution. Most boarders are enrolled when they are 6 years old but some begin as early as 4 or 5. Those that start later are usually already in some emotional difficulty, referred because of delinquency or the disintegration of their families. Thus, children who are young or disturbed, or both, are subjected to the stress of being separated from their parents and then to all the other stresses of Indian school. They are more or less permanently separated from their families, and they need to find in the school a substitute for the family—but even the greatest child care worker cannot be a surrogate to that many children at once. The ratio is often 80:1. The lack of concern for the children's basic needs that is reflected by the relatively small number of traditional dormitory staff is evident in the classroom situation as well. The curriculums, for the most part, are established in Washington and, until recently, with little regard to traditional Navajo teaching. The living situation in the dormitory is usually based on what a healthy white child would need in an institution of limited resources such as a juvenile home. The children have little or no encouragement to confide in the Navajo school personnel. The Navajo houseparents or dormitory aides at some schools were told that they were not qualified to counsel and to refer all such problems to their superiors. If the aides manage to find time to talk with a small child who comes to them for comfort, they get into trouble for overstepping the limits of their position.

Many Navajo instructional aides are aware of the faults in the system but they are the lowest ranking, most easily replaced members of the school staff. They are not in a good position to do anything about it. Some schools do encourage aides to try to be substitute parents but in other circumstances it is not unusual for staff and students to get each other into trouble if they try to develop a personal relationship. One school employee invited several of her girls to come to her quarters and make fry bread, a traditional Indian food. All concerned were reprimanded for this violation of the rules.

Bryde (4) investigated a cross-over phenomenon in the educational performance of Oglala Sioux students. These children achieve satisfactorily for awhile

then reverse themselves and show a steady decline in achievement. In examining past school achievement records taken from the fourth to sixth grades of 164 Indian eighth graders on the California Achievement Test, the results excelled the national norms. However, at the seventh grade the students crossed over and their grades continually declined. Bryde hypothesized that psycho-cultural conflict during the period of adolescence causes personality problems that block educational achievement, and a comparison of the Indian students with white students would reveal significant differences that reflect such personal turmoil.

All students were thus given the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory test and comparison was made. The results of this comparison are of significant interest here. The total Indian group revealed greater personality disruption and poorer adjustment. The more meaningful significant dimensions were feelings of rejection, depression, anxiety, and tendencies to withdraw, as well as social, self, and emotional alienation. More important are the findings that compare Indian and white eighth graders. The Indian students were found to be poorer on 20 of the 28 personality variables. They revealed themselves as feeling caught and carried along by circumstances beyond their control, more rejected, depressed, paranoid, withdrawn, and alienated from themselves and others.

In a pilot study to a major drug epidemiology survey among southwestern Indian adolescents (6), a tangential finding, but one important to the notion of self-concept among American Indians, was that adolescents who displayed moderately deviant behaviors, such as an occasional drug misuse or running away from school, had a higher self-concept than did students who were "good" by school standards. It appears that moderate deviance can be interpreted as a psychological adjustment in terms of the dignity or ego needs of the students.

Is there a solution to this dependency depression? There are several indications that there is. The Federal Government has come to recognize that the social ills cannot be rectified by a continuation of recreating generations of dependent people. The giving of monies perpetuates dependency and in no way cures poverty. Poverty has been described as a way of life, a state of mind, neither of which are necessarily caused by a lack of money. It is much more than material impoverishment. It is, in the most basic form, a lack of self-respect. For many, and certainly for a plentitude of Indian people, it is a consequence of a lack of education, prejudicial victimization, and

a lack of control over one's daily life, future planning, and expectations.

Future Hopes

One example of future hope is the newly enacted Indian Self-Determination Act. This act, now gradually being implemented, will allow Native Americans, in some areas affecting their lives, to be responsible for policy and planning for their tribes.

Another example is religion—a number of Federal programs have begun to recognize the significance of Native American healing practices. There is increasing acceptance of the Native American Church, a Christian pan-Indian religion identifying the Christian trinity with the great spirit of Indian religion. This incorporates the belief in the necessity of the worship of God and brotherhood and the use of peyote as a sacrament (7). Although there is still controversy surrounding the Native American Church, it is rapidly becoming recognized as a bonafide and appropriate form of religion. These are only beginnings, but important. With continued efforts in these directions, the American Indians will resurface as a proud people, capable again of making their own decisions independently.

The Federal Government has recently empowered an American Indian Policy Review Commission. This commission, made up of American Indians, Senators, and Congressmen, is charged with reviewing and making recommendations concerning relationships between American Indians and Federal Government. The commitment appears real, and it will be a critical point in the history of the American Indian and Alaskan Natives.

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